Snow Crushes 9 Mineral King Cabins

Nine mountain cabins in Mineral King Valley have been crushed by heavy snow or avalanches, the U.S. Forest Service reported. An avalanche last February trapped Randy Kletka, 26, Hesperia, in his cabin, causing him to suffocate. None of the slides was at the site of the proposed Alpine village to be built by Walt Disney Enterprises.

2453 Mountain Avenue
Upland, California
May 21, 1969

Editor
Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles, Calif.

Dear Sir:

In the May 21 edition of the Times, an article was published, evidently a release by the Forest Service, reporting the destruction of nine cabins in Mineral King Valley by heavy snow and avalanches. It further reported that such an avalanche killed Randy Kletka in his cabin there in February but then goes on to say that none of the slides was at the site of the proposed Alpine Village to be built by Walt Disney Enterprises

I believe that this was a deliberate attempt on the part of the Forest Service to mislead the public. The Forest Service did not mention that another Disney employee, Wally Ballinger, was buried in another cabin by the same avalanche and dug himself out after four hours, nor that other Disney employees were saved because they had left for the three-day Washington's Birthday weekend.

I had snowshoed into the valley two days before and had an opportunity to see some of the previous avalanches. Randy Kletka told me at that time that with a prior warm rain, the valley had shook and rumbled all day long with avalanches coming down everywhere. These were evidently minor compared to those occurring subsequently.

Avalanches in the valley are not unique to this winter of heavy snowfall. Records going back to the 1800s, when attempts were made to mine the area, report extensive damage and death from such occurrences. This is to be expected, for the valley is narrow with steep slopes going up on all sides.

I am reporting this because the Forest Service and Disney Enterprises are proposing to build a major ski resort there and the State plans to commit in excess of $25,000,000. to build a road to service the resort. They expect to pack 1.7 million visitors per year into the valley, the number that causes serious overcrowding in Yosemite, an area seven times as large. Even if it were not a mistake to destroy a lovely valley by such a development, it would surely be unwise to subject the public to such risks.

It is hoped that this information will provide a sufficient stimulus for your newspaper to investigate the motives for the release of this misleading information by the forest service and the advisability of continuing with the project.

Very truly yours,

Lyal Asay

Lyal Asay, M.D.

LA:eb

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WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS

500 SO. BUENA VISTA ST. • BURBANK, CALIFORNIA 91505 • CABLE ADDRESS: DISNEY

May 24, 1972

Mrs. Jean Koch
6334 West 80th Street
Los Angeles, Ca. 90045

Dear Mrs. Koch:

E. Cardon Walker has asked me to respond to both your letters to him and Robert Hicks.

Realizing the personal interest which you and Dr. Asay have in the Mineral King area, we understand your desire to oppose the Forest Service's decision to make the area available for a higher public use.

However, as you have challenged the honesty and accuracy of our company's statements with regard to Mineral King, I feel an obligation to respond directly.

With regard to the access road, whatever representations were made to the cabin owners by the Forest Service in 1965 are unknown to us. However, with regard to the original prospectus, the Forest Service stated that no public agency, at that time, was obligated to undertake the road project, but that the responsibility for making these arrangements would be up to the successful proponent. As you know, the road was added to the State Highway System prior to either the deadline for submission of proposals in August, 1965, or the date of Walt Disney Productions being selected as the "successful proponent" in December, 1965.

You and others opposing this project have stated that Randy Kletka was, in fact, an employee of Walt Disney Productions.

You have forwarded a letter from Dr. Asay in support of your opinion.

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Although the loss of Randy Kletka was, indeed, unfortunate, there is nothing in Dr. Asay's letter which supports the accusation that Randy was a Disney employee.

The only employees of Walt Disney Productions in Mineral King were Mr. and Mrs. Dave Beck and Wally Ballenger. From time to time Dave Beck hired Gary Kirk to assist him on field trips.

Officials of Walt Disney Productions had been advised by the United States Forest Service that the heavy snows were creating hazardous conditions, and on three separate occasions ordered everyone to leave Mineral King prior to a new storm that was predicted for the area. That is why Mr. and Mrs. Beck were not there, and it is why Wally Ballenger and Randy Kletka should not have been there. However, on their own volition they decided to stay.

In order to lay to rest once and for all the accusation that Randy Kletka was an employee of the Disney organization, I am quoting from a report submitted by Dave Beck soon after the incident in 1969:

"Randy didn't have any money and his car was snowed in (He had been told not to park it there). I offered to lend him money, but he didn't want to borrow...Also he wanted to look after the pets. Had Wally left I would have tried to get Randy to leave since I didn't like to have people alone in Mineral King. He stated that as soon as he could get his car out he was going to L.A. and get a job. He would have left some weeks before if he could have.

"The Pools had left during December, the Kirk brothers and Randy had stayed on. They didn't spend all their time in Mineral King. They would leave for a period of time and return. The Pools had stayed in the Hannah cabin, the boys had stayed in the Mills. We had used the store and cabins for storage, etc. The only one of the boys that ever worked for me was Gary Kirk who assisted me on field trips. These people were my personal friends. The fact that they were there was known to everyone."

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WALT DISNEY PRODUCTIONS

As you know, Walt Disney Productions has not done any work in the area since 1969, when we closed out all our accounts with relation to the Mineral King project. We will not resume work on this project until the public agencies involved resolve favorably the questions now outstanding.

We hope and we trust that your continuing opposition to this project will be characterized by the same high standards of accuracy that you ask of the Disney organization.

Very truly yours,

James L. Stewart

James L. Stewart
Administrative Assistant to
the President

JLS/jh

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5.12.70

Dear Sirs –

I heard of you thru a publication of The L.A chapter of The Sierra Club, The Southern Sierran & was glad to read that some people are still interested in trying to prevent Disneys 'development' of Mineral King.

I imagine most of my reasons for opposing Disneys project are similar to yours – altho I only visited Mineral King 2 or 3 times, it was one of my favorite areas in The Sierras & Disney is obviously not going to improve on it. Also, The area is a game preserve & should be off-limits for that reason alone. And I still do not believe that they can build an all-weather road in to the valley – I was there once in May a few years ago when we had to hike in the last 5 miles because the road could not be cleared any further. Presumably, maintenance of this road, which will be very expensive, will also be funded by the tax payers, like construction of the road itself & I feel this is a most improper use of public funds, to assist private (business.)

I also have, since a year ago, a personal reason for opposition etc to the Disney concern – my ex-husband was killed in an avalanche which buried the cabin at the Mineral King village he was living in. He had been an employee of Disney the summer of 1968 & had stayed on there the winter, assisting David & Susan Bach, who were permanent employees of some 3 years experience

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The avalanche killed my ex-husband, Randall Kretha, our dog (a 2 year old Belgian Sheepdog), the Beck's dog, & their 6 puppies. No word of condolence was given to Randy's parents or any other member of the family — even the 3 days back pay the Disney Corp. owed Randy for some work he had done for one of their photographers was never paid. The Disney Corp. (I believe Thru Robert Hicks) issued statements to local San Joaquin valley papers to the effect that they had ordered everyone out due to the snow hazards; this was not true (the Becks say they were never ordered out; their 'boss', Robert Hicks, was a business man — he was in no position to judge snow conditions.). In L.A. any report of the accident was suppressed till sometime in April when a 6 or 7 line report from the forest service appeared in the L.A. times (the accident occurred at the end of Feb.). The Disney people were most unsympathetic to the Becks, who had lost a friend, their dog and virtually all their personal belongings. As of last July, the last time I saw them, they had not been compensated by Disney in any way, and among their belongings were some $5000. worth of books & equipment, excluding furniture. Needless to say, they have resigned from the Disney organization. Over the Memorial Day weekend of last year, all the cabins were burned down, including one undamaged & quite expensively furnished

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cabin, which had been the summer home of some other friends of the Beebs. No attempt was made by Disney to find these people & tell them to remove their belongings.

To the small group of us who were involved in these events, the name of Disney means something far different than it does for probably any other person in the country, & of course, something far different than it used to mean to us also. But perhaps this does illustrate that the wonderful Disney concern for life & wildlife has not entered into the way they are handling the mineral King project in the least. There is no concern for anything here except big business. Despite their image they are no more humanitarian than Standard Oil.

I would be interested in hearing what your group is doing in opposing Mineral King -

my address 1. thru June 5: 109 Queensberry, Apt. 1
Boston, Mass.
02115

2. after June 5 ~~thru~~ till Sept.: 377 Freeman, Apt.
Long Beach, Cal.
90814

Sincerely,

(Miss) Carol Ambruster

P.S. Please don't use any of the information above for any public purpose without 1st consulting my ex-husbands parents: Mr. + Mrs. Fred Klatka
16632 Bodart St.
Hesperia, Cal 92345
714 - 244 - 9855

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MATTHEW P. MITCHELL
COUNSEL

September 22, 1969

Mrs. Richard Koch
6334 W. 80th Street
Los Angeles, California
90045

RE: Sierra Club; Mineral King

Dear Mrs. Koch:

Thank you for your letter of September 17, 1969.

I have been in contact with Mr. Wollenman and my first impression is that he can provide extremely valuable background information. I plan to be in the Fresno area in connection with certain phases of the case within the next two weeks and have arranged with Mr. Wollenman to spend some time with him also.

Thank you for your assistance and also for the bumper strip.

Sincerely,

Leland R. Selna, Jr.

Leland R. Selna, Jr.

LRS:man

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6334 W. 80th St.
Los Angeles, Calif. 90045
September 17, 1969

Mr. Leland Selna, Jr.
2700 Russ Building
San Francisco, Calif. 94104

Dear Mr. Selna:

We returned from our vacation at Mineral King last week end, so I am just getting around to catching up with my correspondance.

We were sorry we missed you at Mineral King, as we would have liked to have met you.

I believe that Mr. Joe Wollenman, 1876 W. Waddell St., Lindsay, Calif. 93247, might have information which would be helpful in the conducting of the suit. Joe has indicated to me that he has much information concerning the Disney and Forest Service activities regarding Mineral King. He owns a snow cat and he was hired by Disney and the Forest Service for trips into Mineral King in the early stages of planning. He claims to have information regarding falsification of snow reports. He also says he has the address of Dave Beck, the avalanche expert hired by Disney to spend several winters at Mineral King to study snow conditions and learn to control the avalanches. He also claims Dave Beck was discharged by Disney Corporation following his recommendation this spring that the development was not feasible. However, he has not followed through by sending me Dave's address as I requested. He also claims there are 10 or 12 unexploded cannon shells on the slopes to the east and west of the store site at Mineral King as a result of avalanche control measures last winter, and that since the discharge of Dave Beck, neither Disney Productions nor the Forest Service is making efforts to locate and explode these duds. Joe claims that Disney and Forest Service officials have put their trust in him, and that he would feel guilty about telling all that he knows, unless he had to, but that he would welcome being subpoenaed. It might be worth your while to contact him.

You did not indicate whether or not you located the bumper strips which were on a bench beside the road so I'm enclosing one.

Sincerely,

Jean Koch

Mrs. Richard Koch

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